DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 836 FL 020 973

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TITLE The Sociolinguistic Status of English in Malta.
REPORT NO ISSN-0959-2253
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 13p.; For serial issue in which this paper appears, see FL 020 971.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Edinburgh Working Papers in Linguistics; n3 p14-24 1992

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; *Language Variation; Official Languages; *Sociolinguistics; Uncommonly Taught Languages
IDENTIFIERS *Malta; Maltese

ABSTRACT

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The Sociolinguistic Status of English in Malta

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THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC STATUS OF ENGLISH IN MALTA

Antoinette Camilleri (DAL)

Abstract

This paper provides a sociolinguistic description of English language use in Malta at present, in terms of who speaks what language, where and when. Some observations on English language contact with Maltese are made. Finally a brief discussion is taken up as to whether and to what extent it would be appropriate to consider Maltese English as a new institutionalized variety of English.

1. Historical background

English was originally introduced in Malta[1] as a result of British colonization. Malta became a British colony in 1800; it gained independence in 1964 and became a Republic in 1974, but remains a member of the British Commonwealth to the present day.

Throughout the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, however, Italian was the dominant language of government, education and the Roman Catholic Church. It was spoken by the upper classes of Maltese society while Maltese was used by the lower classes and was referred to as 'the language of the kitchen'. Towards the end of the 1800s English was enforced as an entry requirement to the civil service and so an increasing number of Maltese people started to learn English. At the same time, feelings of nationalism came to the fore and gave rise to a politico-linguistic battle known as 'The Language Question' between Italian, English and Maltese. Frendo (1975:22) describes the situation as

> a unique example of a case in which trilingualism became a battle-ground in the successful quest for a national identity. Maltese nationalism rotated in time on this triple paradox: the championing of Italian as a non-Maltese national language; the active promotion of the British Imperial power as a means of expunging Italian; and the gradual emergence of Maltese as a national tongue and as the prime expression of anti-British sentiments.
>
> (Frendo 1975:22)

In 1934 Maltese replaced Italian as the official language of Malta alongside English. The Maltese orthography was standardized and grammars, dictionaries, books on usage and a Maltese literature flourished. English, on the other hand, became the language of education. Italian continued to hold a presence mainly because of the various Italian television channels received in Malta (see Section 2.2 a) and due to the geographical proximity to, and the cultural and religious affinity with, Italy.

EDINBURGH WORKING PAPERS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS, number 3 (1992) ISSN 0959-2253

2. Use of Maltese and English: Domains

The Maltese population is described as 'bilingual' (see Azzopardi, 1981:2; Kontzi 1983:351; Cremona, 1990:163). Generally speaking, Maltese individuals have a working knowledge of Maltese and English. This is necessary in a country where both languages share roles at the national, societal and personal levels.

In what follows, the use of Maltese and English in the domains of administration, media, work, education and home is described.

2.1 Administration

a) Law Courts

In the Law Courts, Maltese has replaced Italian as the 'binding' language and is always used for court proceedings. It is interesting to note though, that the Maltese legal register and the professional language of the lawyers, has been observed to be more influenced by Italian than by English as a result of their law studies at the University.

b) Parliament

Maltese is used in spoken interaction in Parliament while the written reports are kept in both Maltese and English. As many of the politicians belong to the legal profession, the Maltese political register is also rather more influenced by Italian than by English.

c) Curia

In 1936 Italian was declared the official language of the Church (Aquilina 1971:172). Following Vatican Council II, Maltese became the language of the Church and is used in all Church activities. Furthermore various types of text (leaflets, books, audio-tapes etc.) in Maltese are issued regularly by various religious organisations and individuals.

2.2 Media

a) Television

There is one local television station which broadcasts news, programmes on local culture and shows of entertainment (e.g. quizzes, sport, games) in Maltese. Films and documentaries in English are imported from both the UK and the USA During weekdays, a direct programme from the BBC is transmitted for about an hour in the morning, and the American channel CNN is on air for about eight hours during the day. In addition, the Maltese people have access to more than fifteen Italian television channels including the three national Italian stations (RAI).

b) Cinema

All the films shown in Maltese cinemas are British or American, or have English sub-titles.

c) Theatre

Generally speaking, theatre productions are in Maltese and produced locally. However, plays in English are occasionally produced.

d) Newspapers and Magazines

There are a few daily and weekly newspapers in Maltese and one major local daily newspaper in English. The most popular magazines are those imported from the U.K. and Italy.

2.3 Work

Maltese is the spoken language at practically all places of work ranging from factories to offices. However, this does not exclude the possible use of a Mixed Maltese English variety (see Section 3). English is generally used for writing purposes. In government, a significant amount of departmental correspondence takes place in English. In the last four years the Administrative Secretary wrote twice to all Heads of Departments reminding them that they ought to use Maltese. Both of his circulars were written in English! However, Maltese is becoming more frequent in, for example, forms that members of the general public need to fill in like tax and passport forms. Banks use both Maltese and English in their correspondence. English naturally plays a crucial role in the tourist industry where about an eighth of the population earn their living.

2.4 Education

At the University of Malta, English was declared the only official language of the University in 1947, while Maltese was declared official alongside English in 1971 (Aquilina 1971;172). In some private schools, as documented by Navarro and Grech (1984), until very recently students were only allowed to speak English and the use of Maltese was punishable. Nowadays, throughout the education system both Maltese and English are used. It has been observed that normally within any one lesson both languages are used and mixed in complex ways. For example, it is frequently the case that Maltese (mixed in different ways with English) is used as a spoken medium while English is used for writing purposes (more details in Camilleri, 1991b).

2.5 Home

Four types of families can be identified on the basis of their use of Maltese and English at home (see Figure 1).

FAMILY TYPE	Languages acquired (in chronological order)
A	1. Dialect; 2. Standard Maltese; 3. English
B	1. Standard Maltese; 2. English
C	1. Standard Maltese and English
D	1. English; 2. Standard Maltese

Figure 1: Languages acquired in different families.

a) Family Type A: (1) a dialect of Maltese is acquired as a first language by the children because it is the first language of the parents and is spoken widely in the neighbourhood; (2) Standard Maltese is acquired later mainly through explicit teaching by the parents and formal teaching at school; and (3) English is also acquired formally at school (for a sociolinguistic study on this context see Camilleri, 1987).

b) Family type B: (1) Standard Maltese is the native tongue of both parents and the first language of the children; (2) English is acquired through formal education.

c) Family type C: (1) both Maltese and English are used interchangeably by both parents and children. This has given rise to a Mixed Maltese and English variety (cf. Borg, 1986), and in the circumstances one could talk of a Mixed Maltese English variety acquired as a first language.

The following is a short extract from a telephone conversation recorded in a family where speaker A is the mother in this type of family and B belongs to family type A:

A to B: *hello*...(continues in Maltese)

B to A: *hello*...(in Maltese)

B speaks to daughter (in English): *Go and get it. Let me see.*

B speaks to daughter/to herself (in Maltese): *Din suppost tak a nara*
(is this what he should have given you let me see)

B continues speaking to A in Maltese...

d) Family Type D: (1) English is spoken by one or both of the parents and is acquired as an L1 by the children; (2) Maltese is later acquired formally at school and through socialization with Maltese speakers. Probably[2] there are only a few families of this type where both parents are Maltese but speak English to their children. However, there is a number of families where only one parent is Maltese and the other parent is a foreigner and usually the language of the family in these circumstances is English. Usually foreign residents whose L1 is not English resort to English as a means of communication with the local community and do not attempt to learn Maltese which is perceived as a very 'difficult' language to speak and to write, and which they do not really feel it necessary to acquire.

3. Range of language varieties used

Language use in Malta is best described in terms of a range of speech varieties ranging from the dialects of Maltese, through Standard Maltese, Mixed Maltese and English to Maltese English at the other end.

The use of English by the Maltese people was originally referred to as "Maltese English" by Broughton (1976) and set forth by him as a realistic goal to aim for in the teaching of English in Malta. The same term was later employed by Borg (1980). Borg (1986:96) says that while,

> the influence of the first language shows up in the English speech of most Maltese speakers...Maltese English however cannot be considered a homogeneous and discrete variety: rather it is realized by a continuum of speech styles characterised at one end by a minimum of interference from Maltese and at the other by an ever increasing influence of the mother tongue on all linguistic levels. The latter, naturally tend to be socially stigmatized, while the former are held in considerable esteem.
>
> (Borg 1986:96)

At this point it is useful to draw a distinction between the two varieties referred to as "Maltese English" and "Mixed Maltese English". "Maltese English" could be defined as *the English spoken in Malta by bilingual speakers of Maltese and English*. Maltese English is influenced by Maltese on most linguistic levels, namely phonology, grammar, semantics and discourse, but not on the lexical level i.e. there are no Maltese lexical items within a stretch of Maltese English speech. In fact this is the cut- off point between the two varieties because Mixed Maltese English consists of lexical items from both languages. Mixed Maltese English consists of various types of code mixing and switching (see Camilleri,1991b).

The variety initially referred to as "Mixed Maltese English" by Borg (1980) is a functional variety, as observed in use as a medium of instruction in schools. This means that the Maltese bilingual utilizes elements from the two languages in a way that is most efficient in the circumstances. This is a very natural and automatic process (see Gumperz, 1982).

Furthermore, this mixed variety not only seems to be acquired as a mother tongue by a number of children (as in Family Type C), but also seems to be developing as a social dialect in its own right. It has been observed to be particularly flourishing among young people of a tertiary level of education especially as they interact on campus (Sixth Form and University), and outside the campus with friends of the same educational background.

Gibbons (1979) reports on a similar situation in Hong Kong where he says, there is a new generation of children of English language educated parents, who are growing up speaking a mixture of English and Cantonese, which he calls *U-gay-wa*. He says that this variety, which has also resulted from the contact of two languages within a single group, shows the emergence of partial autonomy. He refers to the process of language mixing as it occurs in Hong Kong as 'koinisation' rather than pidginisation and creolisation (after Hymes 1971:78-9). The extent to which the term 'koinisation' could be applied to Mixed Maltese English has still to be examined.

Bentahila and Davies (1983:303) report on a particular variety of code- switching used by Moroccans who are bilingual in Moroccan Arabic and French and say that the use of this mixture, involving very frequent code- switching, could in fact be considered a separate language variety, which Moroccan bilinguals use most typically in casual conversations where all the participants are equally bilingual.

3.1 The influence of the L1

While the linguistic influence of Maltese on English has been described elsewhere

(Delceppo, 1986; Calleja, 1987; Navarro and Grech, 1984), the statement about L1 influence has psycholinguistic implications. For example, is Maltese always the base language (or L1) for all speakers of English in Malta? Are there differences between speakers of Maltese English depending on their home language background as outlined above? If yes, what are these differences? Further empirical investigation is required in this area but some tentative answers are presented here as to who the (native) speaker of Maltese English is.

In answer to this question, the following suggestions are offered:

(i) those speakers born and brought up in Malta to Maltese parents who acquired English after they had acquired a dialect or the Standard Variety of Maltese (Family types A and B);

(ii) those speakers born and brought up in Malta to Maltese parents who acquired both Maltese and English as L1 (Family type C);

(iii) those speakers born and brought up in Malta to Maltese parents whose L1 was Maltese (or both Maltese and English). These people who as a result acquire English as an L1, are still exposed to the English of people with Maltese or Maltese and English mixed, as L1 (as in Family type D).

From the above, it seems that in all three cases Maltese is likely to operate as the base language in their cognitive linguistic organisation. In the case of (i) and (ii), a variety of Maltese has obviously been acquired as a mother-tongue and this will directly affect the acquisition of the English language later on. For type (iii) speakers, Maltese still operates as a base language although in a less direct manner. This is so for two reasons. First of all, because they have acquired an English variety from speakers for whom it was a second language and thus influenced by Maltese, and secondly because their English is acquired in the specific sociolinguistic context of Malta where the variety of English spoken is practically always influenced by Maltese.

The influence of Maltese on the English spoken in Malta could be observed in the speech of practically all speakers. It is readily apparent on the phonetic level, while the influence of English on Maltese is mainly lexical and is observable in some registers more than in others. More research on crosslinguistic influence between Maltese and English is necessary.

3.2 Stigmatization

Different groups of speakers of Maltese and English have different attitudes towards language use in Malta. The following are some examples:

1. Speakers of Maltese as L1 (as in Family types A and B) stigmatize speakers with Maltese and English or English as L1 (as in Family types C and D) as the latter are perceived to be snobs;

2. Maltese speakers of English stigmatize speakers of Maltese, who are seen as less educated and as belonging to a lower social class.

While people normally perceive themselves as speaking either one or the other of the two

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languages, it has been observed by Borg (1980) and Camilleri (1991a and 1991b) that what in fact happens is that all groups of speakers mix the two languages continuously, although presumably not everyone, and not always, mixes them in the same way or to the same extent.

4. Is Maltese English a New English?

In this section, Maltese English is discussed in terms of whether, and to what extent it could be described as a new institutionalized variety of English, as for example, Indian English has.

According to Platt et al. (1984) and Kachru (1986) there are certain features that are common to (and necessary for?) the new Englishes to be considered institutionalized. These are summarized below and their applicability to the Maltese situation is examined.

(i) *The new varieties have developed through the education system.*

This is true for English in Malta to a large extent. However, the education system is not the only means of English language acquisition in Malta. Maltese children and people in general are continuously in contact with native and non-native speakers of English through the tourist industry, and indirectly through the media.

(ii) *English is taught as a subject and used as a medium of instruction in schools.*

In Malta, English is taught as a subject from the very beginning of schooling. Knowledge of English is essential for the Maltese student and for Maltese people in general because books in Maltese are very limited in all subjects, including subjects like Maltese History. Therefore students have to resort to books in English for the acquisition of knowledge.

English is also used as a medium of instruction, and one of the arguments normally brought forward in favour of its use as medium, is that it helps students be more proficient in English. However, one has to be wary of generalizations because very often

Maltese is used alongside English, and is mixed with it in most lessons (see Camilleri, 1991b).

(iii) *Primary importance is given to written sources.*

This is also true for English language instruction, and use of English in general throughout the island.

(iv) *It has local functions in administration, government and the media.*

As outlined in Section 2.2 above, English has a very small role to play in parliament and general government administration, especially as a spoken medium, while it competes with Italian in the media.

(v) *It is used for interethnic communication.*

This does not apply to Malta since the Maltese are an ethnically and culturally homogeneous community.

(vi) *It is culture-bound and has become localized.*

English as it is spoken in Malta has become localized to a certain extent. It has become culture bound mainly when it is influenced by and mixed with Maltese. As Kontzi (1983) shows, even students who seem to use a lot more English at school, are exposed to Maltese within society at large, and they do use it to communicate with neighbours, and to read the local newspapers and to watch the local television channel. However, written English is much closer to its British model.

The question of the use of English in Malta does not have the same relevance to the question of nationalism as it does in some Asian and African countries. The Maltese population in general does not feel the need to speak a different variety from British English in order to distance itself from the colonial days. The Maltese language seems to fulfil all the nationalist needs for the Maltese people and English is mainly perceived as the language of education and a necessary tool for international communication. There is no controversy as to which model of English should be presented in schools - the British model is taken for granted (as presented in books published in Britain and as it is spoken by the Maltese teachers).

It is very important to note at this point, that Maltese English in the perception of its speakers is not a different variety from Standard British English. For example I was told by a headmaster of a private primary school in Malta, that when he tried to explain to parents at a meeting that their English differed from the English spoken in Britain they were very surprised and found it hard to accept. However, this does not mean that they think they speak 'native' British English, but that their English rather than being a separate variety common to all Maltese people, is an individual manifestation of a less than perfect imitation of the model. I have been told by a university lecturer of English in Malta for example, that she has heard people, mainly of the younger generation, apologize for their English which they feel is not good enough. Thus, there seems to be a growing awareness of diversity from British English but this is perceived by its Maltese speakers as a manifestation of interlanguage and not of a new variety of English.

It might be appropriate to point out that a number of schools for the teaching of English as a Foreign Language are flourishing in Malta at the moment. A good number of European and North African people come to Malta for EFL courses given by Maltese teachers. There is, therefore, the understanding that the type of English delivered by Maltese teachers is acceptable at international level.

5. Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn from the above discussion.

1. The difference between written and spoken English must be stressed because while written English in Malta is rather close to British English[3], spoken Maltese English is not always so.

2. When talking about spoken Maltese English we are excluding the use of a Mixed Maltese English variety which is clearly different in terms of social and linguistic characteristics.

3. Spoken Maltese English is mainly used locally for two purposes; (a) for

international communication; and (b) in formal contexts where the topic is normally educational, scientific, technical or professional in some way.

4. Two groups of speakers can also be identified. Maltese people who use English for international communication (3a above), are in the majority and their English generally shows signs of interlanguage phenomena (see Ellis, 1986;47).

The other smaller group of speakers of Maltese English who use it for academic purposes (3b above), are those who probably perceive their English as identical to British English because they had the time and the opportunity to develop this proficiency through many years of study and practice in English, very often in a native environment.

However, although two main uses and two main groups of speakers of Maltese English have been identified, it would probably be more realistic to describe Maltese English in terms of a continuum which ranges from near- nativeness to lesser proficiency by people who are either still learning the language at school or through social interaction, or who have become fossilized at some stage.

In conclusion then, it seems necessary to distinguish between the description of Maltese English on the linguistic, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic levels. From a descriptive point of view, it seems that there is enough evidence to distinguish the English spoken in Malta from the English spoken elsewhere. In sociolinguistic terms English is a complementary variety to Maltese rather than a second language; and it is not perceived by its speakers as a variety in its own right. In psycholinguistic terms Maltese English is, for a large majority of the population influenced by a base language - Maltese.

Notes

1. The Republic of Malta consists of two main inhabited islands with a total area of 246sq. km. and a population of 345,636.

2. There are no official data on languages spoken in Malta. There were no questions on language in any of the national censuses.

3. It has been my recent experience in translating into Maltese from both an English text produced in a Maltese newspaper and another text from a British newspaper, that it was much easier to translate into Maltese from the Maltese newspaper in English than it was from the British newspaper. Could this be taken as evidence of a Maltese linguistic substratum in the written English text?

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